



Coleridge Dickinson
Oral History Transcription
September 22, 2003 [Side B]

Interviewed by: Les Lamon and David Healey

Place of interview: Home of Coleridge Dickinson

Date of interview: September 22, 2003

Approximate length of interview: 34 minutes

Transcribed by: Howard Dukes, staff, civil rights heritage center

Date of transcription: October 2019

Summary: Coleridge Dickinson was the son of state legislator, union leader, and community activist Jesse Dickinson.

00:00:19 [David Healey] What do you mean by that?

[Coleridge Dickinson] By two lost generations I'm referring to the fact that when you go out on the street you see these young people in the late teens and early 20s and some older than that. They ain't doin' nothing. If they haven't; got drugs to push, they don't have jobs and yet you see them driving late model cars. Where did the money come from? They go around here having... not having producing, more children. There is no program that's viable enough to take those children and train them to be productive citizens.

0:01:10 [CD] I had mentioned earlier anywhere from the sixth grade to junior high seventh and eighth grade all the boys had to take shop courses that had auto mechanics, air craft mechanics, electricity, carpentry, printing, blueprint reading... to name a few of the things that they had in the vocational building over at Central. And all the boys in the sixth, seventh and eighth grade over at Central had to take one of those courses. You learned something. You got your feet on the ground to be productive citizens. Somebody got it the wise idea that we didn't need that, so they done away with vocational training, and they had nothing in its place. So, all these kids grow up knowing nothing but what the man puts on TV for them to see. The books that they write the movies that they make and it's all very detrimental to good clean community living

0:02:11 [Les Lamon] I was just going to say that it seems to me that we have failed to instill a sense of civic and community responsibility.

[CD] Well this is particularly in the minority community. Not to be derogatory but I think it has to do mostly with the white population. I say that from this point of view. Whenever you see these kids out there with 25 cents 50 cents worth of crack cocaine and they are killing one another over it. Where does that money go? To the 20th floor of that building downtown. Midland Chemical companies and a few of the others send all these chemicals to South America to Central America. They make all this dope and put it on the ship and bring it back. And these kids get hold of this these drugs they blow their minds and the man sits up there and counts the money and these kids are up here for 25 cents or a dollar killing one another.

0:03:28 [CD] And they want the big car. It's like I was talking to a couple of Mexican kids out here in front of the restaurant and telling them about working and doing something, "Hey man, I ain't gon' do that. You doing all right. You got a nice home, nice car." An older car, it's 13 years old, a Cadillac sedan. But to them it's a nice car. 'You got a nice home.' The house is older than I am. I'm almost 80 and the house is older than that. But the idea that you get what you work for and all you can think about is

the easy way to make money and all you can see out in front of them is big cars big those crazy clothes. That's all that's put out for them to see and they all want it... all want it.

0:04:16 [CD] They all want that regardless how they get it they want it and they do that. And this is why I said what I said because all of the advertising and the display of these things are fostered by big business. And just like Enron, Tyco, Glasko and all the rest of them. Walmart another one I can't stand those people and yet the biggest retailer in the world, but they are a damn bunch of crooks. Whenever they hire somebody you give them a job to do. The job isn't finished you take them off the clock and say finish the job real fast. This is the sort of thing that half of those suits in Oregon now against Walmart are for the same thing and yet these people just flock to Walmart why to save a dollar, to save 50 cents and they never look past that 50 cents they save on that pair of shoes.

0:05:19 [LL] Where does it go? What does it contribute to?

[CD] Yes.

[LL] It's true.

[CD] And this is why I say we have two lost generations those that... those who are my grandkids because my kids aren't that way. My grandkids... a couple I have my doubts about. I don't approve of their behavior and their kids are coming up the wrong way. The woman across the street... Nancy had three kids and we've talked, and she said, 'Well I messed up with two of them.' Well, she and her husband were very heavy on drugs when they first moved over here. And they used to get out there and cuss and fight and threaten to cut each other and everything else. The oldest boy has had his second term in prison, so he's lost. He will never get a job worth a dime. The only thing he's doing to know is pushing merchandise on the corner. That's the only way he knows to make a living. He didn't graduate so he doesn't know anything. He's never had any shop courses he doesn't know how to change a light bulb. Then the said the second one wasn't so bad. That's the girl. She's down at Evansville now going to school down at Evansville. She's got a scholarship down there.

0:06:42 [LL] That's good.

[CD] The youngest one is a boy and he's in Plainfield and he's been in and out of those places. His problem is not that he's bad, but he just wants to be called a crack baby. She and her husband were on drugs and having babies so that's why I think we have two lost generations. I'll take Nancy for an example. She is I think she was working at school city as a monitor in homeroom or something, and then her kids two of them are lost. They'll

never amount to a hill of beans. That's what I mean. We have two generations that are lost. They're gone.

[LL] Well, let me ask you along that line too because I don't know where the leadership will come. You're right we are losing them.

[CD] Faster than we can spit them out.

0:07:45 [LL] Yes, also we haven't fostered the leaders who help us do something about that. In the days when your dad was one of the key leaders in this town who else... who among the other African Americans would have been considered... what we might have considered civil rights leaders?

[CD] They could have been well... I have to stop and think. Other than a few of the preachers we had nobody. A couple of lawyers. A doctor or two I think of Dr. Mott for example. Dr. Chamblee. Of course, Dr. Chamblee - not to be derogatory but had a hell of a lot of white trade because he was Catholic. So, he was always going to Catholic churches, so people got to know him. He had a hell of a lot of traffic from the white people which he to me he could have taken some of those people and worked with similar organizations to foster, but I don't know if he did or not. It just didn't take or if he didn't put forth enough effort. Dr.... we had two Dr. Smiths. One was a GP and one was a podiatrist. They were in a position. In my estimation by being doctors and treating both black and white that maybe they could have done more.

Then we had another doctor. A Dr. Mott for example is another one because he was one of the first black doctors in South Bend, so he had a lot of black and white trade. Dr. Bernard Smith who was a dentist... had an office over on Washington Street next to where the Hansel center is now. He had a heck of a lot of white trade and Dr. Curtis who had his place on Western Avenue across from Marycrest. He to me had a heck of a lot of white trade by being in that Polish neighborhood so he knew all the people that he could have contacted or worked with to achieve things.

0:10:09 [CD] Who do we have today? I don't know. I don't know. Most of the preachers are so busy trying to build up their congregations have the biggest and best church – the prettiest church. They are influential that way more so. People don't like Jesse Jackson but at least he took his leadership and made himself known around the world for trying to foster diversity or race relations. Although some people like that pinhead Gallagher say he's done more to foster racial discrimination than he does to help it. But as long as you are fighting for equalization... to level the playing field I don't see where you are contributing to the problem. It's the ones who foster the problem and keep fostering it who are being detrimental. I know that Jesse Jackson has done some very radical things.

Character wise, just like Clinton, he wasn't the most perfect man as far as his personal conduct was concerned. But hell, I don't give a damn who he goes to bed with. That's his business. Clinton was there to run the company... the country. When he left, I don't know how many billions of dollars they had in the state treasury. It took this knucklehead six months to get rid of it. So, it's a point of who you can pick on right now to be a leader and the black community they receive so much negative publicity - a lot of them don't do what they could do.

0:11:50 [LL] Yep. It seems like we had more then at the time people that you mentioned Rev. Davis was [inaudible]

[CD] Yes, Dave Davis.

[LL] Dave Davis, yeah.

[CD] He worked at Bendix I knew him from Bendix. Dave was a good guy. I never see him mad. Never seen him swear at anybody. He always had a smile and something positive to say. Dave Davis was a very good guy, but he was not active in the civil rights movement. He was another one that worked within the confines of his congregation and the people... I still think he would have been dynamic if he had taken all of his causes and presented them on the floor of the common council.

[LL] Put them out.

[CD] Yeah, school board... was he on the school board? No, but he could have gone as a private citizen and participated. Me I'm not an orator. I don't have the wherewithal to do these things, but I stop and think of people who will get up and talk, talk and don't do a damn thing.

0:13:01 [LL] Talk, but that's not helping very much.'

[CD] I think of Rev. Billy Kirk. I think Kirk did some good - as much as he could but I don't think once again his concern was primarily in the black community working with the black people rather than being in the city and trying to change black and white together. Rev. Kirk was good man. A great man as far as I'm concerned but he was once again limited in what he did.

[DH] I have a couple of quick questions. Before you have to go. You went to Bendix joined the union.

[CD] Um-huh.

[DH] What was the name of the union?

[CD] Bendix local number 9.

[DH] And you worked there for 37 years?

[CD] 37 and a half years.

[DH] How were you promoted at Bendix? Were you promoted regularly?

0:13:56 [CD] No. because it was never a promotional type program that I know of. Most of the people who got to be foreman... foreman there was one Alex Howard he came up through the ranks how he got to be promoted from being an hourly worker to foreman I don't know. All I know is one day I went in there and Howard's a foreman. They had one black woman foreman out there and that was Audrey Harris. You remember the Red Carpet Lounge over on Chapin Street?

[DH] I remember.

[CD] Her brothers... those were her brothers. Mark and Charles Green. Audrey was a preacher, but she was also a foreman at Bendix before she got a church. Now she and her husband were both preachers

[DH] So, this Alex gentleman he was also African American?

[CD] Yes. I just saw him out to Ryan's a couple of weeks ago.

[DH] So, he's still in town?

[CD] Yes, he's still in town.

[LL] Alex Howard?

0:15:10 [CD] Yeah. He lives over on... I think he and Helen live over on Main. I don't know if they still have... where they ever lived. But she was in... on the east side. We all grew up together and she... they got married. It was a second marriage again for both of them and he was never vociferous enough to push to get other blacks elevated. Bill Dixon was a foreman for a while. Now I don't know whether he... who he knew or what steps it took for him to stop pushing a broom and become a foreman, but we never did have a great number of minorities in supervisory capacities. We had some that were what you call set up men. Was it Alex Howard? No, Hedman. Hedman for a long time the set-up man. Charles Reems was a set-up man for a while. For a long time. Jobs at certain departments where that was required was what you got. That's what we found. But most of them was on machines you either... you pulled a handle or a drill press or you worked on a grinder or something. There was no such thing as promotion on those jobs. You did whatever job you were told to do. If you didn't know how to do it, they sent a set-up man over there to show you how to do it.

0:16:59 [DH] You were trained on a variety of different jobs.

[CD] Yes, whatever was in your department that had to be done.

[DH] You never were promoted to foreman?

[CD] No, no, no, no, no. No such thing as promotions.

[DH] You mentioned one time. Talking about housing and real estate and redlining. When you purchased your first home... is this the first home you purchased?

[CD] No, second.

[DH] Second. Did you have any difficulty purchasing your homes? Bank loan. Did you ever feel that you were discriminated against?

[CD] No, not no... not from that standpoint. My first house was out there on the lake.

[DH] Becks Lake.

[CD] Yes, out on... on Wellington Street. That's when COFER started putting up those cracker boxes out there.

[LL] That was Lasalle Park Homes.

[CD] Yeah. No out past that.

[LL] Oh, out past.

[CD] Yeah. Out there where you see those individual homes just off the old dump road. They called Linden Avenue, but what we called the dump road because it used to go to the dump.

0:17:55 [DH] Linden Avenue used to go to the dump?

[CD] Yeah. See Linden avenue was in Washington street but then it would continue on the other side of the railroad tracks you know when you go over the railroad tracks at Meade street?

[DH] Yeah.

[CD] Well that's Linden venue. You come into it and it goes straight on west.

[LL] That's just on the north side of the lake isn't it?

[CD] Yes.

[LL] That's driving on the north side of the lake.

[CD] Yes, just a little bit over from the railroad tracks, going out west. And after you get past Mayflower Road. I think you call it Linden Road.

[DH] Ok.

[CD] And Cofer put up first on the west side... on the south side of Western Avenue. He put up a lot of these houses and then housing people housing I think dad had something to do with it too started to building housing for minorities – so to speak - on the north side of Western Avenue.

0:19:00 So, everything from about Wellington, Falcon... some on Kentucky and maybe four east to Camden. Maybe the first went in on Kaley Street. From Kaley Street on back on the north side of Western Avenue. They started putting up these two-bedroom prefab homes and they were mostly for blacks well that's were my first home was. I think back in those days they started out about three hundred and something dollars down payment and...

[LL] When did you buy that home?

[CD] 1950.

[LL] Ok.

[CD] 1955 I was working at Bendix and I worked second shift and I used to walk home coming through the dump and it was a big step forward because that was the first time that blacks had started buying homes in large quantities.

0:20:02 [LL] Single family homes too.

[CD] Yeah. Single family homes nothing spectacular except for the point that blacks were owning their own homes which was something relatively new. And the thing was they were new homes they weren't used homes and that was a big step, but I look at it that way now. Of course, I didn't then. I knew that was a place for my family to live. And this was the place. We had no grass no sidewalks, the streets were gravel and dirty but eventually it straightened it out.

[LL] You remember when they paved the streets?

[DH] Let's see I moved out there in 50... it must have been a couple of years after I moved out there about 52 or 53 somewhere along in there.

[DH] I'm going to have to interrupt you just for a second.

[LL] David asked right before you left about John Tidwell. What was Tidwell's role?

0:21:05 [CD] Well as far as say... John was a... he started out being a football player at Central that gave a little bit of a... that gave him a name... him a recognizable name then he kind of got tied up in politics to what extent I don't know because right after that I left here and I didn't come back until... I don't know... Fifty... Forty-nine or fifty when I came back to South Bend. John was... I don't know where he worked... at Studebaker or...but he was not what he wanted to be. I think he wanted to be more... have more power. Particularly among the black community than he did and connections with people downtown, but I never just never associated with John because first he was older. Secondly, he was into politics, which I was not. I knew his sister and he and his sister and I went to high school together. John was older than we were, and he was a graduated before we did but as far as what John did it's hard for me to tell you because I don't know...

0:22:30 [LL] Was he associated with your dad in any way?

[CD] Not to my knowledge except no more to the average person that was interested in politics or what was going on in the city and trying to have be in the know and be influential ad get some information about something of that nature.

[LL] Second thing that I wanted to ask. I was looking at this scrapbook that you had here of mostly family photographs and items I see on here a matchbook cover from the Lakeside resort Paradise Lake. You remember going up to Paradise Lake?

[CD] Hundreds of times.

[LL] That was primarily a black vacation area wasn't it?

[CD] Um-huh. Dad played with a band. They used to play up there quite a bit. And matter of fact all summer long they were playing up there for a while there. Also, there was another place that was out by Vandalia.

[LL] Yes.

[CD] Yes.

[LL] I know where it is up there. Yep.

[CD] And we would go up there when dad would play up there. Of course, we would go up there and wait til they got through and sleep all the way home in the car. And then we had Mifflin had a place around on the other

side of the lake. I don't think he ever got the popularity that Paradise... that they gave to Paradise.

0:24:08 [LL] Well what did you think about the fact that African Americans had to go to a sort of separate vacation place like that?

[CD] We never thought too much about it because this was the thing in those days.

[LL] That's just the way it was.

[CD] Yes, just like radio stations... for a long time they asked for I saw this on TV early this morning, well, why did they have to have a black Miss America or a black... because white people didn't let us be part of the others. They had people who were just as good as actors or musicians or athletes, but they just couldn't participate with everybody else so they had to recognize their own people the best they could that's the reason and as far as some people are concerned, just like that pinhead Gallagher. He still wants to have it the way it used to be. He cannot understand why blacks have to have this that and the other.

0:25:13 [LL] I don't know pinhead Gallagher. Is he here locally?

[CD] No, Mike Gallagher on the radio.

[LL] Oh, I know who you are talking about. Yes, I do.

[CD] Yes, old Mike. He was here in town just recently.

[LL] Yep.

[CD] He came in he had something. He begged somebody and got tickets for the ND game I don't know who he begged to fly him here but he begged somebody to fly him here. Put him up for the weekend and give him tickets to the Notre Dame game. They let him go down and direct the band. He is a [inaudible] hypocritical bigoted plutocrat conservative Republican he ain't no good for...

[laughter]

[LL] You caught yourself.

[CD] Yeah, I caught myself on that one.

[LL] Well, I would like to see some of those plaques and some of the other things that you got I mean stuff...

0:00:00 [Audio ends]